

REVIEW

ENGAGING MEN IN HEALTH SERVICES: ARE WE IGNORANT?

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ABSTRACT

Men's health remain unclear term for majority of general population as well as physician worldwide. Nowadays there is an increase interest in addressing men's requirement in health care as a separate branch. When discussing about men's health, it is fair to say that even a man himself does not know much about men's health. Most of them think that men's health is just a discussion on sex. This thought is not entirely right. The scope of men's health is actually larger than the male sex organ itself. To define men's health, we have to look at man holistically.

Keywords: Men's Health, Barriers, Health Care, Factors

INTRODUCTION

The positive general condition of human's body and soul is highly desired by everyone. Free from injuries, illness or any chronic diseases are believed to be the basis of a healthy lifestyle. However, when comparing the health of both men and women, men have poorer health status compared to women in most countries in the world. On an average, men's life expectancy at birth is 5 years shorter than that of women. This was reflected by the vital statistics published by the World Health Organization (2010)¹ as shown in the life expectancy at birth and mortality rates.

Report from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2011)² showed that the life expectancy for men at birth is 72.3 years compared to women, which is 77.2 years. The overall health status of Malaysians, in particular women and children, had improved over the last 50 years but the gap between men and women still remains. In 2008, 57.8% of deaths were men and these deaths were caused by ischemic heart disease which was still top the list (i.e. 14.4%) followed by motor vehicle accident (7.9%), pneumonia (6.6%), cerebrovascular accident (5.8%) and septicaemia (5.6%). Activities such as smoking, lack of exercise, alcohol consumption and poor

diet were shown to have a very large impact on men's health³.

In the context of comprehensive approach to men's health, the Health Department of New South Wales Australia defines the issues of one's health as any issue, condition or determinant that affect the quality of human's life that may prevent them to live within an optimal emotional and physical well-being. In terms of both policy and service delivery, men's health addresses the risks men take with regards to their health, including a high level of health destructive behaviors in which men engage, the reluctance to involve men in the prevention of positive health behavior, and a tendency for men to present late during disease.

Here, we will be discussing on how to engage men to fully utilize the available health services. Besides that, there is also an attempt to place them as having important roles in the society and to be a part of the community in obtaining good health.

Barrier of Men to Healthcare Services

It is now important to know the barriers that prevent men from utilizing healthcare services. Factors that can be attributed to this problem are related to the services provided as well as individual

influences around them. It is thus important for the services to be friendlier towards men. Such services may influence men to seek health services in the health clinic. Limited clinic space, enormous crowd of people and prolong waiting time may make them feel uneasy and reluctant to wait. Furthermore, most men would feel more comfortable to talk about their health especially sexual matters with the same gender. Currently, with the increasing number of women doctor, men has the tendency to feel awkward in expressing their health problem⁴.

When we see the word “man”, the word “masculine” automatically comes together with it. It is not actually a bad thing because man is supposed to be masculine. Men are being emasculated by the masculine itself. Previous studies suggested that seeing a doctor to seek health is a sign of weaknesses according to men perception^{5,6}. Men like to keep things by themselves. This is more frequent among the Asian men⁷. Unlike woman, man is not comfortable being vulnerable. Man will see a man that being vulnerable as weak.

There are many other factors that may further prevent men from assessing health care services. Among them is the lack of time in which men are the primary income earner in their families. Some of them are willing to ignore their own health for a bowl of rice for fear that their families might suffer. This is strongly related to the natural male attitudes to prioritize family obligations. Minor health problems if left unchecked, may then become severe with time.

In fact, one of the major challenges that men face in term of their health is the health promotion of ‘men’s health’ introduced by the popular press or internet. The internet hosts thousands of websites on ‘men’s health’ with the same agenda that is advertise their products,

and other advertisements are driven by pharmaceutical industry, especially in promoting treatment for specific men’s health issues such as sexual health problems. No doubt at present, there are plenty of alternatives as well as traditional medicines. In fact, these drugs are sold at a cheaper price and thus are able to attract buyers as compared to conventional drugs.

Apart from the above mentioned facts there are still many other factors that prevent men from utilizing health services provided by the government. Men are reluctant to be involved in the community when it comes to health. It may be due to their stereotypical attitude towards health, including their beliefs about health. This will lead to the failure of the Ministry of Health in identifying and recognizing the importance of health of young men. This results in the provision of health services that do not reflect the view of men.

Lastly, men’s health is not easy to access unlike women’s health services. There is not enough specialists to cater the need of men’s health. Without enough facility, the accessibility to men’s health is poorer compared to women’s health. To overcome this, more facilities need to be placed in the society and more specialists need to be trained so that man can access health services more conveniently.

Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Man in Relation to Health

Efforts to improve awareness on health issues among men as well as prevention of diseases are important. This target should be focused on men with poor health outcomes.

This includes targeting on risk factors for ill health as well as promoting behavioral and life style changes that can improve men’s health. This comprehensive approach is necessary to be familiarized

by health authorities in order to improve the health of men⁸.

In view of approaching men, adopting a socio-cultural concept can be adopted to show effective results. This is because apart from being the head of the family, men are the leaders of political groups in the community. If they are aware of their important role they would put health as their priority. Moreover if they fall sick, this situation would definitely weaken the administration in the community. Indirectly men can be an icon and role model for their subordinates.

In order to attract men's attention towards improving their health, it is essential to acknowledge the services provider as well as the patient or client himself. Based on the socio-ecological model, there are several stages that need to be looked into in order to get closer to the improvement of men's health. Factors at each level of the social ecology starts from the individual, relationship between men and their wives, between community members and everyone. Hence, the difficulties and problems on every level need to be dealt with.

At the individual level, one of the strategies is to change social skills, cognitive and behavior of an individual. It can be done through the adoption of either health education, mass media and in the workplace. If given daily reminders men will be more open and aware of their health problems. Other than that, counseling and mentoring services can be applied almost everywhere. It can be done in many different ways, such as conducting health booth at a football stadium where many men enjoy attending.

In term of relationship, the spouse plays an important role such as guiding the men to always do health check-up. Men usually listen to their wives and sometimes agree

to their partner's demand. If the wife advise and show support the husband's would certainly be more willing to listen to their advice.

In understanding the concept of men and their health, every effort must be initiated from the grassroots' level such as introducing good practice and understanding health by men. By emphasizing the positive elements as well as the benefits they will get from fully utilizing health services, there will be a possibility that men will increase the usage of health care services in order to maintain their health.

Social Determinants and Key Supporting Men's Health

In the current situation when most people face a variety of issues in relation to health and social services, social determinants currently have a big impact on one's health. Let us recall what are the social determinants of health and its purposes.

According to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, social determinants of health are social and economic conditions that influence the health of people and society. These conditions are determined by money, power and resources that are available in the community where all these determinants influenced the selection of policy. Social determinants can also affect the outcome of one's health⁹. Other components of social determinants of health are income, education, employment and social networks.

Income and Employment

Income and occupation give a significant influence on a person's livelihood. The standard of living of a person who is married or single is also different. A person who is poor with low-income

mostly lives in compact communities and unfavorable surroundings. Most of them are vulnerable to infectious diseases due to overcrowding. If a place is too populated and overcrowded, this will lead to sanitation problems and domestic waste management problems that subsequently result in poor health outcome.

Regardless of a person's income and employment status, men like everyone else are entitled to adequate health services. Possessing good health is not measured by one's employment status and income. Therefore, the coverage of health services should be extensive and caters the needs of all levels of communities regardless of their gender. Health promotion should thus be wide spread and friendlier towards men.

Education

The level of one's education is also no longer the main issue in the practice and use of health services. It is more focused on the use and receive of a service. Exposure or knowledge of health services and its importance can be applied to all individuals. There should be an increase in efforts to explain and promote existing services such as outpatient health services, health screening, reproductive health and mental health. Appropriate method of promotion can attract them to better use the health services available. Administering healthcare booths as a method of health promotion, where many men prefer to access, are good examples in engaging them more closer to healthpromotive activities.

Health campaign should also be held to provide knowledge and exposure. At the same time evaluation should be done to determine the knowledge and acceptance of health services. This evaluation can be done through survey of coverage and

utilization of a particular health service among men.

Relationship and Social Network

Good relationship between communities especially between the husbands and wives are essential in ensuring the healthy well-being of a person. Health policy makers have always emphasized the importance of healthy relationship when it comes to policy making in health matters. For example, in a failed relationship or communication between the husband and wife, detrimental effects especially for the well-being of the children may arise. In a wider context, social isolation or reduction in social support could also affect the health and well-being of men.

Fatherhood is a very important concept in family relationships. Apart from playing the protector role as well as financial provider towards other members of the family, fathers still require full support from other family members. If the father falls sick his role as the provider would be affected. If the importance of his role in the family is emphasised, fathers can be more encouraged to use the health services¹⁰.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, it can be concluded that engaging man towards health care is a dynamic process of sharing and connecting men in achieving good health. In developing countries where strategies are undertaken to engage more men to access health care services, involvement of both the health care delivery system and those who work in the system are similarly important. This includes a variety of parties, including workers in the healthcare field, paramedics, educators and anyone involved in the management of men's health.

Most of men's health related activities occur independently from the primary healthcare. Even men who have already utilized the healthcare services also demand the existence of both solutions beyond the health framework itself as well as within it. Men often feel more comfortable at work than health-oriented environments such as community health centers, hospitals, maternal and child health centers. Many men also thought that the delivery of the health system act as a threat which cannot be trusted fully.

A method of community approach is one way of bringing men to the health services. For a start, we need to stop complaining about the flaws and weaknesses of men in assessing the health care services compared to women. In fact, we must always have the confidence that men would be more responsive and will fully utilize the healthcare services. By introducing working health programmes, we can successfully engage men in using the health care services. As a final result, we hope to reduce absenteeism, higher productivity among men, higher work force retention rates and healthy working male workers.

To improve the health care system, efforts must be done to attract men to use these services. Firstly, to help men understand how the health care services work such as the appointment system. This can be done by understanding men's job requirements before making an appointment date and honestly explain to these men the importance of this appointment date. In addition, health providers should have more interesting reading materials such as men's magazine in the waiting room. Other strategies include setting up a software or application based on current technology to communicate and giving information to male patient such as using SMS as reminder. Provision of men's health

information could also be uploaded on the website.

In conclusion, engaging between the health care providers and those who utilize it i.e. men is important in reducing morbidity and mortality among men. These practices are hoped to attract more men, with the anticipation that they will readily and voluntarily access the health facilities.

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